

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ABU DHABI 002470

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: DECL: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KPAL](#) [KWBG](#) [AE](#)

SUBJECT: THE PALESTINIAN COMMUNITY IN THE UAE: A PROSPEROUS SILENT MINORITY

REF: (A) 2005 ABU DHABI 3404, (B) ABU DHABI 2248

¶11. (SBU) SUMMARY: MORE THAN 120,000 PALESTINIAN EXPATRIATES CURRENTLY RESIDE IN THE UAE, A GULF STATE WHICH IS A MAJOR AID DONOR TO PALESTINIANS IN THE WEST BANK AND GAZA. OVER THE LAST SEVERAL DECADES, PALESTINIANS HAVE COME TO THE UAE, BRINGING WITH THEM THEIR EDUCATION, KNOW-HOW, AND CAPITAL -- A RELATIONSHIP THAT HAS SERVED THE MUTUAL INTERESTS OF BOTH THE UAE AND THE PALESTINIANS. MANY PALESTINIANS HAVE ACHIEVED SUCCESS IN BUSINESS, AND A CHOSEN FEW HAVE WON UAE CITIZENSHIP. PALESTINIANS IN THE UAE TEND NOT TO ENGAGE IN ANY OVERT POLITICAL ACTIVITY THAT COULD JEOPARDIZE THEIR RESIDENCY STATUS, BUT THEY DO PURSUE VIGOROUS DEBATE AMONG THEMSELVES ABOUT POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS, PARTICULARLY THOSE IN THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES. END SUMMARY.

BLOOD, SWEAT, AND TEARS (AND MAYBE A PASSPORT)

¶12. (U) SINCE AT LEAST THE EARLY 1960'S, PALESTINIANS HAVE ARRIVED IN THE UAE AND PLAYED KEY ROLES IN THE COUNTRY'S DEVELOPMENT. WHILE MOST EARLY IMMIGRANTS WORKED AS TEACHERS OR TOOK JOBS IN THE OIL FIELDS, PALESTINIAN RESIDENTS NOW WORK IN ALL SECTORS OF THE ECONOMY. THE MAJORITY OF UAE-PALESTINIAN FAMILIES TEND TO STAY IN THE UAE AS LONG AS THEY CAN, USUALLY LEAVING ONLY WHEN THE SPONSORED FAMILY MEMBERS RETIRE AND THEIR WORK/RESIDENCE VISAS ARE CANCELLED. PARENTS WHO DEPART PRIOR TO RETIREMENT USUALLY RETURN TO JORDAN WHEN THEIR CHILDREN GO TO UNIVERSITY, OR EMIGRATE AFTER HAVING SUCCESSFULLY SOUGHT RESIDENCY PERMITS IN CANADA.

¶13. (SBU) TODAY, PALESTINIANS OCCUPY SENIOR POSITIONS IN UAE GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS AND BANKS, OWN IMPORTANT BUSINESSES, AND TEACH IN SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES. ONE EXAMPLE, IBRAHIM AL ABED, A PALESTINIAN WHO ACQUIRED UAE CITIZENSHIP, DIRECTS THE UAE WIRE SERVICE, EMIRATES NEWS AGENCY (A POSITION COMPARABLE TO THAT OF AN UNDER SECRETARY). HE ALSO SERVED FOR 10 YEARS AS MEDIA ADVISOR

SIPDIS
TO THEN-INFORMATION MINISTER (AND CURRENT FOREIGN MINISTER) SHEIKH ABDULLAH BIN ZAYED AL NAHYAN. OTHER PALESTINIAN EMIRATIS OF NOTE INCLUDE YOUSEF AL HASSAN, THE DIRECTOR OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS' INSTITUTE OF DIPLOMACY IN ABU DHABI; GHASSAN TAHOUB, THE ADVISOR TO THE RULER OF DUBAI; AND ZUHDI AL KHATIB, THE CULTURAL AND EDUCATION ATTACHE AT THE UAE EMBASSY IN JORDAN.

¶14. (U) THE APPROXIMATELY 120,000 PALESTINIAN EXPATRIATES IN THE UAE ARE PRIMARILY SUNNI MUSLIMS WITH A FEW THOUSAND CHRISTIANS. THEY MAY CARRY ONE OF SEVERAL DIFFERENT IDENTIFICATION DOCUMENTS INCLUDING SYRIAN AND LEBANESE TRAVEL DOCUMENTS, TEMPORARY (VALID FOR 2 YEARS) OR PERMANENT JORDANIAN PASSPORTS (VALID FOR 5 YEARS); PALESTINIAN PASSPORTS (FOR GAZANS); AND UAE AND OTHER FOREIGN PASSPORTS. MOST PALESTINIAN BUSINESS MEN AND WOMEN HOLD EITHER A PERMANENT JORDANIAN PASSPORT OR A PASSPORT FROM ANOTHER COUNTRY, SINCE HOLDERS OF PALESTINIAN AND TEMPORARY JORDANIAN PASSPORTS, OR SYRIAN AND LEBANESE TRAVEL DOCUMENTS, OFTEN FACE DIFFICULTIES IN TRAVELING AND IN PROCESSING BUSINESS AND PERSONAL DOCUMENTS.

¶15. (SBU) PALESTINIANS IN THE UAE OFTEN SEEK CITIZENSHIP IN OTHER COUNTRIES, WITH SPECIFIC INTEREST IN CANADA. MANY APPLY FOR CANADIAN IMMIGRATION WHILE THEIR CHILDREN ARE STILL IN SCHOOL, AND THEN EITHER EMIGRATE AS A FAMILY, OR JUST SEND THEIR CHILDREN TO STUDY IN CANADA AFTER HIGH SCHOOL. MANY PALESTINIANS WHO WORKED CLOSELY WITH UAE RULING FAMILIES 30-40 YEARS AGO NOW CARRY UAE PASSPORTS. THE PATH TO CITIZENSHIP THROUGH LOYAL SERVICE IS MOST COMMON IN DUBAI. DURING THE PAST YEAR, SOME PALESTINIANS AND OTHER EXPATRIATE FAMILIES WHO HAVE BEEN RESIDENTS IN DUBAI FOR OVER 30 YEARS WERE ABLE TO APPLY AND GET CITIZENSHIP FROM THE EMIRATE OF DUBAI, ALTHOUGH MOST REMAIN FRUSTRATED BY THE LACK OF OPPORTUNITY TO BECOME CITIZENS. DUBAI APPEARS TO BE THE ONLY EMIRATE THAT ACTIVELY FACILITATES CITIZENSHIP, BUT EVEN THAT IS NOT ON A LARGE SCALE. ALTHOUGH THE GRANTING OF UAE CITIZENSHIP OCCURS ON A VERY LIMITED BASIS, OTHER GCC COUNTRIES HAVE FAR STRICTER REGULATIONS FOR GRANTING CITIZENSHIP. LOCAL PALESTINIANS BELIEVE THAT SAUDI ARABIA AND QATAR ARE THE MOST DIFFICULT

GULF COUNTRIES IN WHICH TO OBTAIN CITIZENSHIP.

UAE SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIANS AT HOME AND ABROAD

16. (SBU) UAE NATIONALS ARE GENERALLY SUPPORTIVE OF PALESTINIANS BOTH WITHIN THE UAE AS WELL AS ABROAD. EMIRATIS OFTEN VOICE SUPPORT FOR PALESTINIANS AND FREQUENTLY CONDEMN ISRAELI AND AMERICAN POLICIES PERCEIVED AS DETRIMENTAL TO THE INTERESTS OF PALESTINIANS. THE UAEG OFFERS SIGNIFICANT FOREIGN ASSISTANCE TO THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE IN THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES, GENERALLY PROVIDED IN THE FORM OF NON-MONETARY ASSISTANCE SUCH AS THE BUILDING AND EQUIPPING OF HOSPITALS, OR THE \$100 MILLION SHEIKH KHALIFA HOUSING COMPLEX CURRENTLY UNDER CONSTRUCTION IN GAZA FOR 30,000-40,000 DISPLACED PALESTINIANS (REF A). BOTH MONETARY AND NON-MONETARY CONTRIBUTIONS ARE USUALLY CHANNELED THROUGH THE UAE RED CRESCENT SOCIETY, WHICH PROVIDED \$9.7 MILLION IN AID TO THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES IN 2005 (REF B).

17. (SBU) UAEG OFFICIALS HAVE EXPRESSED PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL ACTIVITIES ORGANIZED BY PALESTINIAN INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE UAE. FUNDRAISING DINNERS, RAMADANIFTARS, AND HOMEMADE FOOD SALES FOR CHARITY ARE HOSTED BY SHEIKH NAHYAN BIN MUBARAK AL-NAHYAN, MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION. DURING RAMADAN, SHEIKH NAHYAN COMMONLY RECEIVES A NUMBER OF PALESTINIAN VIPS, SUCH AS SECURITY ADVISOR MOHAMMED DAHLAN, TOP BUSINESSMAN AND EX-FINANCE MINISTER MUNIB AL MASRI, AND OTHERS, AT HIS MAJLIS. ADDITIONALLY, LECTURES ON ISSUES RELATING TO THE PALESTINIAN SITUATION ARE ORGANIZED THROUGH THE UAE CULTURAL FOUNDATION. THE UAEG SUPPORTS A PRIVATE PALESTINIAN SCHOOL, "AL QUDS," THROUGH FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE AND BY APPROVING THE SCHOOL'S FUND RAISING ACTIVITIES.

18. (SBU) IN ADDITION TO FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES, THE UAEG HAS BEEN SUPPORTIVE OF CULTURAL AND CIVIC ACTIVITIES. AS EXAMPLES, THE ABU DHABI CULTURAL FOUNDATION HAS HOSTED KNESSET MEMBER AZMI BISHARA TO DISCUSS PALESTINIAN POLITICAL ISSUES, AND THE FORMER DEPUTY PALESTINIAN MINISTER OF CULTURE, SUAD AL-AMIRY, TO TALK ABOUT LIFE AND TIMES IN PALESTINE (AL-AMIRY IS NOW THE DIRECTOR OF A RAMALLAH-BASED NGO). YASSER ABED RABBO SPOKE AT THE EMIRATES CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES AND RESEARCH (ECSSR) CONFERENCE IN MARCH 2006. AND IN MAY, ABU DHABI MUSIC FOUNDATION HOSTED RAMI KHALIFEH, THE SON OF THE POLITICAL SINGER MARCEL KHALIFEH. PALESTINE INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY, RECENTLY OPENED A LIAISON OFFICE IN DUBAI, AND WILL START ITS FIRST ACADEMIC SEMESTER IN SEPTEMBER.

POLITICS LESS URGENT THAN RESIDENCE PERMITS

19. (SBU) PALESTINIANS HAVE FOUND SECURITY IN WHAT THEY PERCEIVE TO BE A WELCOMING COUNTRY AND THEREFORE DO NOT GENERALLY ENGAGE IN ANY POLITICAL ACTIVITY LIKELY TO JEOPARDIZE THEIR RESIDENCE STATUS OR TO "ROCK THE BOAT." IN THE PAST, POLITICAL-RELATED ACTIVITIES WERE USUALLY CONFINED TO SIT-INS AT THE PALESTINIAN EMBASSY COMPOUND IN ABU DHABI (THE UAEG APPROVED THE LAST DEMONSTRATION IN 2000 AFTER THE START OF THE SECOND INTIFADA), AND LECTURES BY POLITICAL FIGURES AT THE ABU DHABI CULTURAL FOUNDATION AND THE ECSSR.

10. (SBU) ALTHOUGH POLITICAL DISCUSSIONS AMONG PALESTINIANS ARE SUBDUED IN PUBLIC, THEY ARE OFTEN LIVELY AND HEATED IN PRIVATE. IT IS IMPOSSIBLE THESE DAYS TO ENTER A PALESTINIAN HOME IN THE UAE WITHOUT HEARING FERVENT DEBATE ABOUT THE PROS AND CONS OF HAMAS IN LEADERSHIP. EARLIER THE TALK WAS OF SUPPORTING FATAH, BUT LATELY PALESTINIANS HERE ARE SAYING THAT HAMAS SHOULD BE GIVEN A CHANCE, ESPECIALLY WITH THE FINANCIAL CORRUPTION IN FATAH CIRCLES. (NOTE: THE NEW PALESTINIAN AMBASSADOR TO THE UAE, KHAIRY AL-ARIDI, IS A FATAH MEMBER. END NOTE.) PALESTINIAN EDUCATORS, PRIMARILY ARABIC AND ISLAMIC STUDIES TEACHERS, OFFER STRONG SUPPORT TO HAMAS AND TEND TO BE MORE CONSERVATIVE OR EVEN EXTREMIST IN THEIR VIEWS THAN THE REST OF THE UAE PALESTINIAN POPULATION. (NOTE: THE UAEG HAS BEEN WORKING SINCE AT LEAST 2004 TO MODERNIZE AND UPDATE THE ISLAMIC STUDIES CURRICULUM IN ORDER TO CORRECT "MISINTERPRETATIONS OF ISLAM." END NOTE.) SOME PALESTINIANS, HOWEVER, HAVE NO PARTICULAR PREFERENCE OR SUPPORT FOR A POLITICAL PARTY. MANY, IF NOT MOST, STILL EXPRESS LONGING FOR AN INDEPENDENT PALESTINIAN STATE, WHILE SOME EXPRESS BITTERNESS THAT STATEHOOD HAS NOT YET BEEN ACHIEVED.

PALESTINIANS WELL-REPRESENTED IN UAE BUSINESS

11. (SBU) PALESTINIANS ARE SIGNIFICANT INVESTORS IN THE UAE, PREFERRING FOR SEVERAL REASONS NOT TO INVEST IN THE PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES. HAVING LIVED IN THE UAE FOR DECADES, MANY STARTED AS SALARIED EMPLOYEES AND THEN WERE ABLE TO GATHER ENOUGH MONEY TO OPEN THEIR OWN BUSINESSES, WHILE A FEW POSSESSED CAPITAL THAT THEY USED FOR INVESTING IN THE UAE. MANY PALESTINIANS MANAGE THEIR OWN BUSINESSES IN THE UAE. AS EXAMPLES, THE OWNER OF A MAJOR CHAIN STORE

"GRAND STORES", MOHAMED ABU ISSA, IS A PALESTINIAN JORDANIAN. A MAJOR CONTRACTOR FOR SECURITY AND OIL EQUIPMENT, WHO IS ALSO A MAJOR FINANCIAL CONTRACTOR COUNTRY, IS PALESTINIAN AMERICAN NOOREDDIN SEHWEIL. A MAJOR CONTRACTING COMPANY IN ABU DHABI IS OWNED BY A PALESTINIAN JORDANIAN, MUNTHER FARAH. THE PALESTINIAN BUSINESS COUNCIL WAS ESTABLISHED ABOUT TWO YEARS AGO AND HAS SINCE BEEN ACTIVE IN COLLECTING CONTRIBUTIONS FROM PALESTINIAN BUSINESS PEOPLE, AND ENHANCING BUSINESS TIES BETWEEN THE UAEG AND THE PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY (PA). THE COUNCIL ALSO HOSTS VISITING OFFICIAL PALESTINIAN FIGURES, SUCH AS PA PRESIDENT MAHMOUD ABBAS, WHO VISITED THE UAE LAST FEBRUARY. ACCORDING TO A COUNCIL MEMBER, 60-70% OF PALESTINIAN BUSINESS IN THE UAE IS IN THE CONTRACTING FIELD, FOLLOWED BY 7-10% IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY FIELD, AND ANOTHER 7-10% IN THE MEDICAL SUPPLY FIELD. SOME OF THE PALESTINIAN HIGH ROLLERS ARE: PALESTINIAN JORDANIAN RIYAD AL-ASSADI, OWNER OF A MAJOR CONSTRUCTION COMPANY; PALESTINIAN JORDANIAN SAMI SULEIMAN, UNTIL RECENTLY A MANAGER AND PARTNER OF THE GROCERY STORE CHAIN "SPINNEYS"; PALESTINIAN JORDANIAN NASSER ODEH, OWNER OF ANOTHER LARGE CONSTRUCTION COMPANY; AND RIAD AL-SADEK, WHO NOW HAS EMIRATI CITIZENSHIP (PREVIOUSLY HELD A LEBANESE PASSPORT) AND IS A BUSINESS PARTNER OF REGIONAL EMIRATI BUSINESS MAGNATE KHALAF AL-HABTOOR.

FUNDRAISING - A PRIMARY SOCIAL OUTLET

¶12. (SBU) MOST PALESTINIANS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO ARE WELL ESTABLISHED IN THE UAE, ARE INVOLVED IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER IN FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES TO BENEFIT PALESTINIANS OR PALESTINIAN CAUSES. MANY BECAME WELL FIXED FINANCIALLY AFTER MIGRATING TO THE GULF. PALESTINIAN EMIRATI, LAILA AL-HASSAN, WIFE OF YOUSEF AL-HASSAN(SEE PARA 3), IS AN ACTIVE PROMOTER OF FUNDRAISERS. PALESTINIAN JORDANIAN MOHAMED HIRZALLAH, OWNER OF A MAJOR SHIPPING COMPANY, IS ALSO A VERY ACTIVE CONTRIBUTOR TO CHARITY AND FUNDRAISING EVENTS. WELL-TO-DO PALESTINIAN WOMEN OVER 40 OFTEN BELONG AND CONTRIBUTE FINANCIALLY TO SOCIAL ASSOCIATIONS. BASHAYER, A CHRISTIAN PALESTINIAN ALL-WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION, HAS BEEN ACTIVE IN BRINGING SPEAKERS TO ADDRESS WEST BANK ISSUES. BASHAYER ALSO HAS BEEN ACTIVE IN CHARITY AND FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES. AL-QUDS (JERUSALEM) OPEN UNIVERSITY HAS AN OFFICE IN THE UAE AND HAS ALSO BEEN ACTIVE IN ORGANIZING CHARITY DINNERS UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF SHEIKH NAHYAN. ANOTHER UAE-BASED PALESTINIAN ORGANIZATION, MIN USRA LI USRA (LITERALLY "FROM ONE FAMILY TO ANOTHER"), IS ACTIVE IN ORGANIZING FUND RAISING EVENTS IN THE COUNTRY, SUCH AS CHARITY DINNERS, RAMADAN IFTARS AND PALESTINIAN THEATRICALS. IN MAY 2006, THE ORGANIZATION ARRANGED FOR A POPULAR PALESTINIAN PLAY ENTITLED "A PALESTINIAN NEIGHBORHOOD: STORIES FROM UNDER THE OCCUPATION," TO BE PERFORMED IN ABU DHABI AND THE NORTHERN EMIRATES. (NOTE: UAE LAW REQUIRES THAT ALL FUNDRAISING BE APPROVED BY THE MINISTRY OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS. THE UAEG HAS STIPULATED THAT INTERNATIONAL CHARITABLE CONTRIBUTIONS BE FUNNELED THROUGH ONE OF THREE QUASI-GOVERNMENTAL ENTITIES. IT IS UNCLEAR IF ALL OF THE ABOVE-REFERENCED FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES COMPLY WITH ESTABLISHED UAEG REGULATIONS. END NOTE.)

COMMENT:

¶13. (SBU) PALESTINIAN EXPATRIATES IN THE UAE EXPRESS MODERATE POLITICAL LEANINGS AS EVIDENCED BY THEIR SUBDUED REACTION TO THE HAMAS VICTORY IN THE JANUARY 2006 PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS. THOUSANDS HAVE PROSPERED HERE, BENEFITING FROM THE STRONG ECONOMY AND FAVORABLE TREATMENT BY THE UAE GOVERNMENT. UNWILLING TO JEOPARDIZE THEIR RESIDENCY STATUS, PALESTINIANS IN THE UAE WILL CONTINUE TO PURSUE ECONOMIC GOALS, ALONG WITH FUNDRAISING FOR PALESTINIAN CAUSES, WHILE FOR THE MOST PART KEEPING THEIR POLITICS TO THEMSELVES.

SISON